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**A Comprehensive History of the Amazon Rainforest**

Everybody is at least somewhat familiar with the Amazon rainforest. Spanning almost seven million kilometers squared (about twice the size of India[[1]](#footnote-1)), it is the largest rainforest in the world, and as such, it is also the home to about a tenth of all the known species in the world (panda.org, 2005). However, what the average person is not quite aware of is the expansive history of this place and what led it to be what it is today.

**Formation**

Although, it is hypothesized that the formation of the Amazon Rainforest started somewhere between 33.9 and 56 million years ago during the Eocene era (Burnham, 2004), it is not until about 10,000 to about 11,000 years ago that humans made their entrance unto the scene. Due to the archaeological findings of a great amount of pottery fragments, stone points, and fertilizer remains, it is speculated that millions of indigenous people lived throughout the rainforest, though were mostly concentrated along rivers where they engaged in farming using “terra preta,” soil with a high concentration of minerals whose name comes from the blackish color it appears. We cannot confidently confirm on the amount of farming that was done during this period, but we can accurately state that interior forest areas were lightly impacted (Bucht, 2014).

**Colonization**

The next big shift happened in 1541 when fueled by legends of the golden city of “El Dorado,” Gonzalo Pizarro and his lieutenant Francisco de Orellana, brother and cousin (respectively) of well-known explorer Francisco Pizarro, embarked in an expedition in the search for the city of gold that had been rumored to be further South. However, after many casualties and low food supply, Gonzalo turned back with about 80 Spaniards. However, in the search for more food, Francisco to explore further east with the remaining 220 Spaniards and around 4000 natives. Francisco and Gonzalo started their journey in the city of Quito, the modern-day capital of Ecuador, but it was only Francisco that sailed his way through the entirety of the Amazon River until he reached the Atlantic Ocean (Pattara L, 2018). However, despite not finding much gold and losing a total of 140 Spaniards and 3000 natives, whom either died or deserted, the remaining crew proved successful in returning to Spain with gold and cinnamon, an extremely valuable spice at the time. In addition, Francisco returned with great tales of unknown animals and plants as well as the artifacts of the people, from their decorated robes, to their pottery, to the way they thrived in their environment, to their physique. As a matter of fact, the current name for the Amazon river arose from this expedition since when Francisco spoke about his travels to the King and Queen he told tales of a tribe with skilled archer women who almost wiped out his army and how the women in this tribe were massive and great warriors. Hence, the name for the river arose due to the similarity between these tribe women and the ancient Greek legend of the Amazonian warriors (Mann, 2019). Results and stories like these, provided the basis for people’s expectations for the region, a bountiful rainforest full of spices, unknown plants and animals, and promises of precious metals for only the brave to seize.

Over the next couple of centuries a great variety of explorers from Portugal and Spain seeking to make a fortune would come to explore the Amazon, many of them returning home with exotic animals, spices, and precious metals while at the same time spreading disease over the native population. Many of these natives would also involuntarily become miners and plantation workers often through the “encomineda” and “mita” systems which sought to maximize labor in exchange for basic commodities or an extremely low wage (Bucht, 2014). Even Francisco made a return in the form of a second expedition, but he died of sickness and fatigue caused by the excessive amount of indigenous attacks and misfortune his crew faced (OVO, 2018). Although this continued for centuries even after the independence of many of these South American countries, agriculture and mining did not cut that deep into the Amazon. What did cut into the Amazon was the rubber boom of the mid 1800’s and the subsequent mindset of the usage of the Amazon’s resources.

**Modern Day**

The Rubber Boom of the 1800s was just what it sounds like. During the middle of the first industrial revolution, many uses were found for rubber and as the demand grew someone had to meet it. Many indigenous people were enslaved for the sake of rubber extraction and the immigration to South American countries increased dramatically. By 1855, over 2,100 tons of rubber was exported from the Amazon and by 1879, the figure was closer to 10,000(Weinstein, 1985). Much like the conquistadores a few centuries prior, these tales of financial success attracted further entrepreneurs to the region, and soon, several other industries were being developed in the Amazon. It was not until about 1945 that the rubber boom slowed down, and despite it dissipating, several business practices from that period are still present to this day such as child labor which is currently considered one of Brazil’s most significant social issues by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics which in 2015 estimated more than 2.7 million minors between the ages of 5 and 17 to be actively working(Azevedo, 2017).

As if this was not enough, in 1922 Portuguese film maker Silvino Santos shot the first documentary of the Amazon called “No País das Amazonas” (Alencar, 1970). The great amount of activity and use of natural resources astonished its audience as it depicted fishing, harvesting of nuts and fruits, general crop farming, and rubber extraction among other sorts of product production. It further cemented a general notion in people that there was opportunity for inexhaustible production and wealth in this land. Just three years later in 1925, Hamilton Rice was inspired to geographically map the Amazon forest using modern techniques and technologies like photography, hydroplanes, and the radio. In addition, he took measurements on the people living in the Amazon at the time from their characteristics, to their bodily features, to their behaviors. Up until now, these indigenous people were considered inconsequential to the environment since they were so few and sparse. However, due to Rice’s measurements and recordings, we can now see that due to the patterns of these indigenous people, certain places in the Amazon have the sign of human meddling in them. For example, it was found that among the foliage near villages, patches of edible plants now existed, the nearby edible fruits were bigger, and several animals, such as monkeys, that ate these fruits were now missing from the area. Through a bit of deduction, it could be seem that these were an effect of the local natives partaking in certain activities such as choosing the bigger and juicier fruits while unconsciously selectively planting the seeds of these fruits when they were discarded or defecated. Over millennia, these activities as well as others like hunting predators shifted the Amazonian environment ever so slightly to suit these natives that survived ever since the first conquests.

Despite this codependency of the natives and the Amazon forest, the Brazilian government did not consider these people as a substantial enough reason to not exploit the land. Hence, in the 1970’s in an attempt to create an “economic miracle” and to gain the favor of the people, Brazil’s military regime further exploited the resources of the Amazon through extensive roadbuilding and cutting of trees for farmland (Fonseca, 2006). However, as the farmland was being developed, a problem was encountered. The soil was not fertile. In an attempt to counteract this, the soil was heavily fertilized, but regardless of how much fertilizer was used, the frequent and heavy rain would frequently return and wash away the nutrients. Without all the leaves and debris from animals and trees, the soil would remain infertile and unusable. Betty Meggers summarizes this irony in her book “Amazonia” where she describes the Amazon as a counterfeit paradise since despite the rainforest being rich, green, and lush, the soil was codependent to this greenery, rather than the cause for it. (Meggers, 1998)

Although deforestation has not completely stopped, awareness for it has increased. For example, due to the environmental activism of organizations and individuals throughout the world, national parks following the USA model now exist in the Amazon. Hence, living in some places of the Amazon forest is now illegal, regardless of if the person living there is an indigenous individual or a person from a city. Sadly, people that were already living in these places within the Amazon were also kicked which brings us to today. People are now arguing on whether this is a good or bad thing. After all, the general consensus nowadays appears to be that humans only poison the environment, and this seems especially hard to ignore when it is repeated and reverberated through the news and opinions of the people. However, there is one more thing that should be mentioned, geoglyphs.

Geoglyphs were perfectly geometric shapes that were noticed to be located in several places throughout the Amazon. By 1999, 30 geoglyphs had been found. They would only increase in number from here. Oldest appears to be from 2000 years ago an earliest from 750 years ago. Hence, people made these geometrical structures/pits a long time ago for a purpose, so the Amazon was in fact more inhabited than we thought. Therefore, it appears that humans were also an integral part of the Amazon at one point. So why is that important? Here’s my 2 cents:

Nature without people is not nature and preserving that does not seem natural. Letting indigenous people live in their forests and protecting them from people with more power and technology seems the most beneficial. After all, they more than any other human appear to preserve the Amazon the best. Finally, if this project taught me anything, it’s that we are part of nature and we need to learn to live and collaborate with it just like we did at the beginning, not isolate ourselves from it.

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1. Check it out here if you don’t believe me: <https://TheTrueSize.com>  
   (Rather than pasting a static image, I figured this would be more entertaining) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)